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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Iowa Central Community College participated in the Exploring America's Communities project sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges. The project worked to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. Due to the limited scope of the students' understanding of American "identity" and the differences and commonalties between different groups of Americans, the focus of the college's action plan was the development of a course that integrated American history and American literature and emphasized the quest for common ground in assessing American identity. The course is slated to be taught for the first time in the fall of 1997. Students enrolled in the team-taught course will participate in discussions and volunteer in the community. The effort made by team members, faculty, department heads and administration have allowed the planning and development of the course to run smoothly. Participants have been generally supportive. Perhaps the greatest obstacle has been the lack of release time for the team members. The need for inservice training in diversity for all employees has been recognized. Such training would give faculty the opportunity to participate in special staff development seminars on inclusion of American pluralism and identity into their specific disciplines. (HAA)

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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FINAL REPORT

EXPLORING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES: IN QUEST OF COMMON GROUND

IOWA CENTRAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Iowa Central Community College is located in rural northwest Iowa. Established in 1968 the college serves a nine-county area through its four centers and an interactive telecommunication system. This area of Iowa lacks in diversity as the majority of its residents are English-speaking of Northern European descent. However, in recent years the population has been changing with an influx of Asian and Hispanic immigrants to Fort Dodge and Storm Lake. The African-American population is approximately 3% in Fort Dodge and less than 1% in the total area. The college student population of 2,500 is somewhat more diverse with international students from 11 countries and numerous African-American students from other parts of the United States.

In the past there has been little interest in broadening the curriculum to include greater

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diversity because there has been relatively little diversity in the faculty and staff of the college and in the geographical area the college serves. However, many faculty members have begun to sense the need to introduce students to the broader world of diverse thinking brought on through cultural differences. This concern became even more evident and worrisome after some groups of students and faculty had the opportunity to participate in the national teleconference EXPLORING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES on October 10, 1995. Discussion following the teleconference pointed the students' shallow understanding of who we are, our differences and our commonalities. It was clear that traditional American history and American literature courses taught in the area high schools and at the community college had not been effective in exploring American pluralism.

For this reason the basic focus of the college's Action Plan was to develop a course that will integrate American history and American literature, emphasizing the quest for common ground and what it means to be an American among the plethora of American voices. Students enrolled in this course will also have the opportunity to experience American pluralism and identity through community

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volunteerism. This latter experience will be an important part to building common ground among diverse populations. As an introductory humanities course it will be discussion-based and team taught, and, will involve a variety of teaching techniques to attract a broad range of students. American pluralism and identity will be examined through a study of the intertwining of history, literature, music, art, film and dance. The cornerstone text for exploration of American values and the common defining vision of America will be the "Declaration of Independence." Students will first define their own vision of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and then examine interpretations according to literary and historical voices within the ethnic groups. An important thesis which the course will address is that the "Declaration" expresses an ideal that has not been realized for many Americans and that it is the struggle to achieve this ideal that binds us together as Americans.

At this point in time the Plan of Action has successfully followed its timetable. The course is slated to be taught for the first time in the fall semester, 1997. The sequential steps in the planning, development and acceptance of the course

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went very smoothly. This was due to the effort made by team members to introduce a broad range of faculty members, department heads and administration to the project. During the fall staff development days in late August our mentor Elizabeth Brown-Guillory spent the day meeting with these groups. In addition Brown-Guillory was the principal presenter for an afternoon workshop entitled FINDING COMMON GROUND IN THE CLASSROOM. About thirty faculty members and six community members attended the workshop which was held off-campus in a local meeting room. The program included an All American lunch, music from the diverse groups which make up the state of Iowa, a small group activity on diversity in the classroom, and a literary presentation by Brown-Guillory during which she incorporated a variety of short literary excerpts into the whole discussion of common ground. Participants, other than those from the college, included individuals representing various community agencies dealing with diversity. At this same time the Human Rights Director for Fort Dodge was beginning a city-wide diversity council. Several members from the college including two of the team members have since become members of the council. It is through this effort that the team hopes to expand to the second level

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of the Plan of Action. That is, the development of an outreach program to our nine-county area similar to Performers on the Prairie, our artists series, and Focus International, the semester-long international program celebrated each spring at Iowa Central Community College. Part of the outreach program is in place for the fall of 1997. Simon Estes, a well-known African American baritone who has Iowa roots, will perform with the Iowa Central Choral Group in October. During the day preceding the performance he will give master classes for vocal music students. This will be followed with other programs highlighting ethnicity.

The Plan of Action as such has met with very few obstacles. The faculty, department chairs and administration in general have been extremely supportive. The division which has been least involved has been the area of Enrollment Management. The team has attempted to involve the support staff from that division but timing has not been right. Probably the greatest obstacle has been the lack of release time for the team members. All have the maximum load of classes as well as other duties within the institution. Our mentor Brown-Guillory was somewhat overwhelmed by our

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schedules and made note of this to the vice president of instruction and to the foundation/grants officer. This is definitely a concern the institution needs to review if there is a sincere interest in grant writing and other activities involving indepth projects.

Even though time spent on the project has been our own the team has a keen desire to go beyond our small beginning. We see the need to have in-service training in diversity for all employees of Iowa Central Community College. In addition to this training the faculty would have the opportunity to participate in special staff development seminars on inclusion of topics on American pluralism and identity into their specific discipline. In the past we have found the faculty more likely to integrate special topics into the curriculum if they identify with the need. In order to expand to an outreach program for the nine-county area as well as to train the employees of the college funding must be secured. The team finds that its next mission is to locate funding sources and write the necessary grant proposals.

This project, though in its infancy, has brought changes to the college. Students and staff are

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more aware of American pluralism. Finding common ground is a goal which has yet to be addressed. The institution is grateful to the AACC/NEH for the opportunity to participate in this project.

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